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ABSTRACT

A study examined attitudes that discourage students from competing in rhetorical criticism forensic events. Subjects, 31 students at the Michigan Intercollegiate Speech Association state championship, completed a questionnaire. Results indicated that: (1) only 1 of the 11 subjects who had experience in competitive rhetorical criticism chose to stop participating in the event; (2) of the 20 respondents who had never competed, only 8 claimed that they believed a rhetorical criticism speech was too difficult to write; (3) gender differences apparently played no part in competitor apprehension; (4) several subjects indicated an influence of educational level, interests and exposure on participation in rhetorical criticism; (5) lack of understanding about the rhetorical criticism event appeared to be a primary reason for competitor avoidance; and (6) encouragement from coaches was a significant factor in a student's decision to pursue success in rhetorical criticism. Findings suggest that intercollegiate forensic coaches and facilitators need to provide ample encouragement to their students and decide exactly what rhetorical criticism is. (Twenty-three references are attached.) (RS)

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Student Attitudes towards Rhetorical Criticism in Individual Events Competition

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Paper presented at the Central States Communication Association annual conference, Lexington, KY

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Running head: STUDENT ATTITUDES

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Student Attitudes towards Rhetorical Criticism in Individual Events Competition

Introduction

For the past 22 years, students and educators alike have gathered annually in late April to attend the National Forensic Association (NFA) individual events nationals. On average, 1078 students representing 126 colleges and universities flock to the NFA tournament to determine their national champions (Reynolds, 1990). Yet, of those 1078 students, only an average of 109 compete in the event known as rhetorical criticism (Reynolds, 1990). In comparison, 312 contestants--nearly one third of the average number of competitors--participate in prose interpretation, which is generally the largest event at NFA (Reynolds, 1990). When considering the fact that a large number of forensic competitors go on to pursue graduate degrees in communication research, theory, and application, it seems peculiar that contestant interest in rhetorical criticism is so low. Certainly, this trend merits further investigation.

Rhetorical criticism, and its American Forensic Association (AFA) equivalent, communication analysis, is generally accepted as being an educationally rewarding event. Barefield (1967) suggested that the event has many valuable properties, as it demands practical application of rhetorical principles, develops critical thinking skills, encourages scholarship, creates interest in public address, and provides competitors with excellent speech models. Benoit (1985) stated that competitive rhetorical criticism creates a unique link between forensics and the field of communication.

Additionally, the research skills acquired when planning an original public address event such as rhetorical criticism can aid students in pursuing other

academic endeavors (Callow, 1990). A final purpose for competitive rhetorical criticism, according to Murphy (1988), should be to train students to become practicing critics of communication and public discourse. As administrators of forensic activity, we need to examine why our students avoid such a valuable event.

Interaction with other forensic coaches and facilitators yields little insight as to the source of this problem. Generally, coaches tend to dismiss student apathy towards rhetorical criticism by rationalizing that competitors avoid this event simply because they think it either is too boring, too political, or requires too much work. This explanation, however, is insufficient. The purpose of this study is to determine exactly what variables deter students from participating in the rhetorical criticism event. In order to do so, the issue of competitive rhetorical criticism and students' avoidance of that event will be examined through an extensive review of relevant literature. This literature review also will reveal some specific factors which may add to competitor apprehension regarding tournament rhetorical criticism.

Rationale

Unfortunately, there is a lack of research in this particular area. Forensics research, in general, tends to be of a pedagogical, rather than experimental or scholarly, nature (Porter, 1990). Although rhetorical criticism as a forensic event has been examined frequently, particularly in the last decade (Aden, 1992), previous research has avoided addressing the specific area of competitor disinterest in rhetorical criticism competition. Although the current studies in forensics and competitive rhetorical criticism have been helpful, an in-depth investigation and synthesis of relevant literature is necessary to

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determine the exact sources of student apathy towards competitive rhetorical criticism.

Review of Literature

There are several possible reasons for the current lack of competitor interest in rhetorical criticism, including gender differences, lack of understanding about the event due to limited educational exposure, and confusing event standards.

Gender Perceptions

Four studies have examined gender differences in individual events competition (Friedley & Manchester, 1985; Friedley & Manchester, 1987; Manchester & Friedley, 1984; Murphy, 1989). At the AFA nationals in 1984, the ratio of male to female competitors in communication analysis was 71:29 (Manchester & Friedley, 1984). However, the ratio of males to females in all original public address events combined was 57:43, a much more balanced mixture (Manchester & Friedley, 1984). Although the results of the 1985 nationals were more gender-balanced (Friedley & Manchester, 1985), this significant difference supports a possible link between gender and lack of competitor interest, as there may be a competitor perception of rhetorical criticism as being a "male-oriented" event.

Murphy (1989) examined this perception in order to find out why women are markedly less successful in the public address events. The author asserted that because males and females differ greatly in argumentative styles, male competitors are perceived as being more rational and logical than their female counterparts. As a result, women are left to either ignore these norms, or adapt their styles into more "masculine" techniques. Further inquiry into this area seems warranted for a thorough analysis as to whether or not this perception

affects participation in rhetorical criticism, as well as the other public address events.

Extent of Education in Rhetorical Theory

It can be argued that lack of educational exposure to the principles of communication analysis is a contributor to apprehension about the event. Because tournament rhetorical criticism is an educationally rewarding experience, the old adage of "those that can, do" exists. Newer, less experienced competitors unfamiliar with scholarly rhetorical criticism are intimidated by their more "scholarly" counterparts.

As a result of this apprehension, these competitors turn to both their coaches and their coursework when preparing a rhetorical criticism speech. However, in their investigation into communication research instruction, Frey and Botan (1988) revealed that rhetorical-critical research was largely ignored in introductory undergraduate courses in communication research. Rosenthal (1985) concluded that because many coaches and judges also have a limited background in communication analysis, they have difficulty understanding the event from a theoretical standpoint. Indeed, Murphy (1988) stated that the focus on communication theory in rhetorical criticism leads to lack of student and coach involvement. A lack of educational resources in the field of forensics itself was noted by Bickford (1990); this also limits understanding of the event. Because so many coaches, judges, and competitors have limited exposure to rhetorical criticism, an air of confusion clouds the event, thus discouraging many students from competing.

Event Specifications

League affiliation differences. Another reason for lack of competitor

interest in tournament rhetorical criticism is the confusion that exists over the event's rules and specifications. The definitions of rhetorical criticism vary between the NFA and the AFA (Kay & Aden, 1989). The differences between the AFA communication analysis event and the NFA event, rhetorical criticism, vary in both artifact choice and evaluative methodologies. The NFA rhetorical criticism event is defined as follows:

> Contestants will deliver an original critical analysis of any significant rhetorical artifact. The speaker should limit quotations from or summary of [sic] paraphrase of the analyzed artifact to a minimum. Any legitimate critical rhetorical methodology is permissible as long as it serves to open up the artifact for the audience. (Kay & Aden, 1989, p. 32)

In essence, NFA rules require a scholarly approach; utilizing an established critical methodology in order to analyze any significant rhetorical artifact (Kay & Aden, 1989). However, the AFA takes a perspective which leans towards the popular media, and which may either evaluate or explain any communication event (Kay & Aden, 1989). The AFA describes their event as:

> An original speech by the student designed to offer an explanation and/or evaluation of a communication event such as a speech, speaker, movement, poem, poster, film, campaign, etc., through the use of rhetorical principles. Audio-visual aids may or may not be used to supplement and reinforce the message. (Kay & Aden, 1989, p.31)

Obviously, the two events are, essentially, very similar (Pratt, 1989). Both of the events require students to construct an 8-10 minute original speech which explains or evaluates a form of persuasive communication through the use of rhetorical principles. However, the two events reflect slightly

different perspectives. Unfortunately, because the two leagues are so closely intertwined, many schools compete at both NFA and AFA tournaments. This merging of the two events in the competitive atmosphere contributes to confusion over the specifics of the two events.

While many forensic scholars agree that refinement of the rules for these events is vital (Greenstreet, 1990; Kay & Aden, 1989; Larson, 1985; Murphy, 1988), even among the opinions of these scholars, many differences exist, particularly in the areas of method and topic choice, speech structure and content, and use of questioning.

Method and topic choice. Several perspectives on the use of method and topic choice exist. Greenstreet (1990) discussed the need for clarification of the types of artifacts and methodologies permissible, and recommended parameters for subject area to be determined yearly. Benoit and Dean (1985) encouraged topic choice experimentation in rhetorical criticism, particularly in the area of literary analysis. German (1985) supported the NFA methodological approach for analysis, and suggested several sources for students to utilize when searching for methods. Newer methods of analysis, particularly the fantasy theme perspective, were encouraged by Shields and Preston (1985). Kay and Aden (1989) proposed a new set of rules for the event, focusing on artifact significance and replacing traditional methodologies with evaluative perspectives.

Speech structure and content. Speech content is another area which requires further clarification. Kay and Aden (1989) recommended an approach which describes, interprets, and evaluates the artifact. Because the current event specifications don't allow for this lengthy, yet more comprehensive, presentation, an extension of the time constraints from 10 up to 15 minutes has

been suggested (Greenstreet, 1990; Larson, 1985). Another content detail that has been suggested is placing more emphasis on the actual text of the rhetorical artifacts (Aden, 1992; Murphy, 1988), although NFA rules prohibit extensive quoting of the artifact (Kay & Aden, 1989).

The questioning period. Finally, the use of questions in rhetorical criticism has been debated frequently in the forensics community. At the 1989 NFA tournament, the coaches voted to delete the questioning period that had traditionally followed every round of rhetorical criticism (Levasseur & Dean, 1989). Although the student assembly elected to keep the questioning period, their efforts were to no avail, and questions were omitted from the rhetorical criticism format (Levasseur & Dean, 1989).

In their content analysis of judge's comments from over 300 rhetorical criticism ballots, Dean and Benoit (1984) revealed the time constraints of the event made it difficult for students to include everything that their judges wanted out of the presentations. Apparently, the questioning period allowed students to clarify those points that may have been too detailed or complex to include in their speeches without infringing on the time constraints of the event. Because the competitors favored the questioning system, its excise from competition may have contributed to student discomfiture surrounding tournament rhetorical criticism.

Possible factors which may contribute to the current lack of competitor interest in rhetorical criticism have now been identified. However, the effects of gender differences, educational interests, and event specifications on competitive rhetorical criticism participation are only speculative, as are the extent of these factors. Therefore, the following research question has been

posed:

RQ 1: To what extent do these factors discourage students from competing in the rhetorical criticism forensic event?

Method

Students at the Michigan Intercollegiate Speech Association (MISL) state championship tournament were asked to answer a questionnaire regarding their attitudes towards competitive rhetorical criticism. The MISL tournament was held at Oakland University in Rochester Hills, Michigan, on March 6, 1993. This competition was chosen for three primary reasons. First, the convenient location of the tournament made it ideal for surveying. Second, the six schools which participated at the state championship tournament represented a fairly wide cross-section of the forensic community. These schools included a community college, a small four-year college, and four state universities of various sizes. Finally, because MISL had hosted a novice tournament at Oakland the day before the state tournament, several novices, as well as more experienced competitors, were in attendance. Surveys were distributed to all of the competitors at the tournament. Of the 49 surveys distributed, 31 were completed, for a return rate of 63%. In addition, of the six schools in attendance, representatives from five of the schools returned the survey.

The questions asked on the survey were written after examination of the information attained through the review of the literature. For the purposes of the study, students were asked to consider "rhetorical criticism" and "communication analysis" as being the same event. The study began with a series of questions related to the respondents education level and competitive experience. Students were asked to list their college name, as well as their

choice of major and minor curriculum, and the number of years that they had been in college. The respondents also were asked to state their gender, the number of semesters that they had competed at the college level, and the type of events that they most frequently competed in (The choices given for this question were "public address", "limited prep", and "interpretative events." Respondents were permitted to choose more than one answer.) The subjects then were asked if, to their knowledge, their school offered an undergraduate course in rhetorical criticism, and whether they had taken, or would be willing to take such a class. The final question in this section asked the respondents if they had ever competed in rhetorical criticism. After answering this question, respondents were referred to one of two sections of the survey.

Subjects that answered "no" to whether or not they had ever competed in rhetorical criticism were then asked the question "why have you never competed in rhetorical criticism?" A variety of possible responses, such as "Rhet crit is boring", "My coaches have never encouraged me", and "Rhet crit requires too much research" were provided for respondents. Participants were encouraged to select as many responses as they deemed applicable. Additionally, respondents were given ample space and encouragement to clarify or add to any answers.

Students who stated that they had competed in rhetorical criticism were asked a series of three questions. First, respondents were asked how long they had been competing before they had attempted the rhetorical criticism event. The second question was "Why did you decide to compete in rhetorical criticism?" Once again, students were provided with a variety of possible responses, with space to expand and clarify any responses. Finally, respondents that had at one time competed in rhetorical criticism but no longer participated in the event

were given a chance to explain why.

Results

Of the 31 survey respondents, 11 had experience in competitive rhetorical criticism and 20 did not. Only one of the rhetorical criticism competitors had chosen to stop participating in the event, and he claimed that the event was too difficult in terms of research and topic/method selection. This supports the general assumption of the forensic community: That rhetorical criticism is unpopular because it requires too much work. However, of the 20 remaining respondents--those that had never competed in rhetorical criticism--only eight responded with answers concerned with the difficulty of the event. All eight of those competitors claimed that they believed a rhetorical criticism speech was too difficult to write. Of those eight, four also believed that it was too difficult to find an appropriate topic or method; four believed that the event requires too much research. It is interesting to note here that in his analysis of the six 1991 NFA finalist speeches, Aden (1992) revealed the average number of sources cited was 5.8. This number indicates that successful rhetorical criticism speeches requires research--although probably not a significant amount more than any other original public address event requires.

Because only two-fifths of the non-rhetorical criticism competitors cited event difficulty as a reason for never attempting the event, and only six of the total 20 stated that they found the event dull or uninteresting, we need to look for other other variables that affect competitor disinterest. Once again, we may examine the areas of gender differences, education, and confusion over event standards.

Gender Differences

According to the survey responses, more men than women had competed in rhetorical criticism. However, more males than females responded to the survey. In actuality, approximately one-third of the respondents of both genders had competed in the event. This result indicates that any perceived male gender bias in rhetorical criticism may be simply a result of higher overall male participation in forensics. These findings may be slightly inaccurate, however, as six of the 31 subjects (three who had competed in rhetorical criticism and three who had not) did not respond to the gender question.

None of the 20 survey respondents that had never attempted rhetorical criticism selected gender-related concerns as a reason for not competing in the event, even though the event is typically somewhat male-dominated. However, the student respondents may have been reluctant to admit any gender differences or bias, even if they felt that one existed. Nevertheless, from the results, we cannot conclude that gender differences play any part in competitor apprehension towards rhetorical criticism. Therefore, we must turn to the second area of analysis, education.

Educational Exposure

Several of the survey responses indicated the influence of educational level, interests, and exposure on participation in rhetorical criticism. The first area which can be examined is undergraduate education in the principles of communication analysis.

Three of the schools that were present at the MISL state tournament offer an undergraduate course in rhetorical criticism, yet each of these teams had at least one member, in one case as many as five competitors, that did not know

that such a course was offered. In addition, of the eight total students that were unaware of the availability of these course offerings, five stated that they would be interested in taking a rhetorical criticism course.

Class standing and educational level also appear to have an influence on willingness to compete in rhetorical criticism. Not surprisingly, a majority of the competitors that had never attempted rhetorical criticism were novices. Fourteen of the 20 respondents that had never competed in the event had been participating in intercollegiate forensics for less than two semesters. Two of these competitors even remarked that their novice standing was their primary reason for never attempting the event. Additionally, three of the remaining six non-rhetorical criticism respondents had been competing for less than two years.

Even though these novices indicated that they weren't ready for rhetorical criticism competition, the participants surveyed that had experience with the event had only been competing an average of under two semesters before they had decided to attempt the event. Even though many novices feel that they aren't ready to take on the challenge of rhetorical criticism, most of the competitors surveyed initially attempted the event within their first year of competition.

The perception that rhetorical criticism is too political for the interests of most students, or that only hard-core future rhetoricians are interested in it, are not completely supported by the student responses. Political science and communication were the two most common curriculum choices for rhetorical criticism participants. However, 19 of the total 31 respondents stated that they were either majoring or minoring in one of these two fields. Although all but three of the rhetorical criticism competitors stated that they found the event appealing because it either complemented their political interests or because it

was consistent with their chosen courses of study, it seems as though other competitors would choose to compete in the event for the same reason. Indeed, individual events competition is virtually inseparable from the fields of communication and political science. In addition to these courses of study, however, the rhetorical criticism competitors surveyed also study topics such as history, mathematics, French, psychology, English, public administration, art, and journalism. Obviously rhetorical criticism, much like individual events competition itself, is an event that appeals to more than just communication studies and political science students.

In conjunction with educational interests, interest in the field of individual events may also deter competitors from participating in rhetorical criticism. Of the 11 respondents that had competed in rhetorical criticism, most stated that they generally competed in public address events, limited preparation events, or both. Only three of the subjects admitted to competing in the interpretative events on a regular basis, and it is important to note that these competitors listed all three event categories as their specialties. Of the 20 non-rhetorical criticism competitors, exactly one-half announced that they compete regularly in the interpretative events. Apparently, strict "interpers" don't compete in rhetorical criticism. Perhaps this finding is not surprising; after all, we cannot expect competitors to participate in every event. However, this trend is still significant, and is another reason why competitor education and interests prevent students from competing in rhetorical criticism.

Event Specifications

Lack of understanding about the rhetorical criticism event appears to be a primary reason for competitor avoidance. Sixty percent of the non-rhetorical

criticism competitors cited either not understanding the rules or the event itself as a reason for having never attempted the event. The difficulty that students perceive in writing a rhetorical criticism, as well as the difficult quest for a suitable topic and methodology, are also important to mention in this section. Differences between AFA and NFA perspectives lead to confusion over event rules and specifications. In turn, this confusion makes the quest for the perfect speech even more difficult for competitors.

Another contributor to confusion over the event may be the omission of the questioning period. None of the students surveyed listed the lack of a question-and-answer period as a disadvantage to the event. However, none of the students surveyed were competing during the 1988-89 school year--the last season that judge's questions were part of the event. Lack of questions do make it difficult to write rhetorical criticism: Ten minutes is not nearly enough time to recite a full, clear rhetorical criticism with no need for questioning (Dean & Benoit, 1984).

One final finding, perhaps the most significant of all, is the effect of encouragement on competitor participation. Every competitor that had experience in rhetorical criticism competition claimed that encouragement from their coach was a factor in their decision to attempt the event. None of the respondents that had never attempted the event stated that their coaches had ever discouraged them from competing in rhetorical criticism. However, 45% of those students stated that a primary factor in their avoidance of the event was the fact that they had never been encouraged to try rhetorical criticism.

Encouragement from coaches is obviously a significant factor in a students decision to pursue success in rhetorical criticism. Forensic students need to be

encouraged to compete in the event, and this encouragement should, and can, come early in their forensic careers. In addition, confusion over event standards, as well as educational interests and exposure, also appear to be factors in student apprehension and avoidance of rhetorical criticism.

Discussion

As intercollegiate forensic coaches and facilitators, we are burdened with a variety of teaching, administrative, and coaching responsibilities, as well as countless other duties. However, our main objective should be to make sure that our students are getting as much as possible out of their forensic experience. After all, forensic activity exists for the benefit of our students (McBath, 1984).

The first action that we need to take is to provide ample encouragement to our students. This encouragement can come in two forms. First, rhetorical criticism needs to be "sold" to students as an interesting and enjoyable event that can complement a variety of interests. Students should be informed as to the types of courses on campus that relate to their forensic interests, and novice competitors must be encouraged further to take on new challenges early in their competitive careers. The second way that encouragement may be provided is to stop discouraging students. True, none of the students claimed that they ever had been discouraged, but coaches may be sending subconscious messages to their students. Simple actions--such as groaning when we're assigned to judge rhetorical criticism rounds--convey a negative attitude which may rub off on our competitors

Second, as a community, forensic facilitators need to decide for once and for all, exactly what rhetorical criticism is. Changes in rules (such as the

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deletion of the questioning period) have contributed to confusion over the rhetorical criticism event. In terms of league affiliation differences, the NFA and AFA rules are generally very similar for events that are shared by the two leagues. Rhetorical criticism and communication analysis are the exceptions to this generalization. In order to clarify this issue, forensic facilitators need to educate themselves on this issue. Several scholars already have made attempts at clarifying the event. It is not until the forensic community decides on a paradigm for competitive rhetorical criticism that we can truly encourage students to participate in the event.

In order to encourage more students to pursue rhetorical criticism, this new paradigm must allow for a great deal of freedom in terms of artifact and perspective choice. For example, if political science majors can pursue success in rhetorical criticism by analyzing a political campaign strategy, then students interested in theatre and interpretation should also be allowed the opportunity to analyze literary or cinematic artifacts. If forensic activity, and thus by association, rhetorical criticism, is designed in the best interests of students, then it should be beneficial to all students.

Limitations

Although the purpose of this paper was to determine the factors that cause students to avoid the rhetorical criticism event, there were some limitations to the study. First, a relatively small portion of the forensic community was surveyed, all of the competitors were from the same region, and none of the schools surveyed attend the AFA nationals. Second, the survey did not allow students to explain their likes and dislikes about the event, but simply asked why they chose the event.

Even with these limitations, the study does begin to provide answers to the rhetorical criticism participation question. Although the sample was small, the students were from diverse competitive and educational backgrounds. In addition, the survey did allow for students to comment on the event freely. Therefore, despite the limitations, the findings are still significant to the forensic community.

Suggestions for Future Research

This paper represents exploratory research, designed to find the answers to one forensic phenomenon. By no means, however, is this issue settled. As a community, we need to examine what our students feel are the relevant issues concerning rhetorical criticism. A survey examining a larger, more diverse sample of the forensic community might provide further insights into this issue. Also, an examination of students perceptions of the differences between communication analysis and rhetorical criticism might prove insightful.

Finally, it is clear that the current state of competitive rhetorical criticism must be remedied. Aden (1992) suggests a variety of actions, including SCA short courses, tournament seminars, or a redevelopment of event rules.

The current state of competitive rhetorical criticism can and must be improved. Currently, students avoid the event for a variety of reasons; educational level and interests, confusing event specifications, and lack of coach encouragement. Rhetorical criticism needs to be made more accessible and interesting to undergraduate forensic participants. Such a beneficial and vital event cannot be overlooked.

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